**Lower Your Standards**

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The middle of the summer has a way of throwing many writers into a panic. Even the most diligent academic writers who have formulated [a summer plan,](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/summer/summer1" \t "_blank) created [support and accountability mechanisms](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/summer/summer2" \t "_self), developed a relationship with [their bodyguard](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/summer/summer3" \t "_self), and are [dedicated to daily writing](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/summer/summer4" \t "_self), can feel the summer slipping away. There’s just something that sets in after the July 4th weekend that makes those long summer months start to look more like weeks. As a result, the first week of July is a time when many of us begin to realize that: 1) academic writing is a *very* slow process, 2) the brilliant ideas we started the summer with may not be quite as groundbreaking as we imagined, 3) we have grossly underestimated the amount of time our summer projects will take to complete and 4) our summer plans may need some downward revision.

The combination of these various realizations can leave dedicated summer writers feeling frustrated and the procrastinators (who haven’t yet started their writing) hesitant to begin. I want to encourage you to keep observing and working with your resistance to writing this summer. Last week, I described [surface-level resistance](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/summer/summer4" \t "_self): when you know you *should* write, but you’re just not putting any energy into*doing*it. This week, I want to start discussing the deeper levels of resistance that get triggered by the physical act of writing.

The broad array of behavioral [tips and tricks](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/summer/summer4" \t "_self) I’ve described in previous columns will get most people to the computer, but actually writing is a different ballgame. In fact, for many academic writers, sitting down each day to write is tremendously anxiety-provoking. So much so that our [inner bodyguard](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/summer/summer3" \t "_self) springs up to protect us in the form of procrastination, avoidance, and/or denial. I have worked with thousands of academics, and the most common demons that underlie resistance to writing are: 1) unrealistically high expectations, 2) disempowerment, 3) a hyperactive inner critic, 4) unclear goals, and/or 5) a fear of success (or failure). I’m going to exorcise each of these demons one by one this summer in a way that encourages conscious reflection on each one. I’m also going to suggest some concrete strategies that I’ve seen writers use effectively to *release the anxiety-producing elements* and respond in a way that *reduces resistance* so you can move forward in your writing.

**Examining Your Expectations**

High expectations are tricky. On the one hand, if you're reading this column, you've already experienced tremendous educational success and that is likely tied to having high expectations for yourself. On the other hand, when our expectations about who we *should* be, how we *should*feel, what we *should* achieve, and the impact our work *should* have in the world are too high, unexamined, inappropriate for our current career stage, or generated from a desperate need to prove ourselves, they become a straitjacket. I’ve seen high expectations manifest in a variety of ways among academics, including:

*Super-Professor:* There are so many roles that I must perform perfectly NOW! I want to be a cutting-edge researcher, institutional change agent, transformative teacher, inspiring role model, community activist, *and*public intellectual all at the same time. Regrettably, I’m so busy running around trying to do all of these things simultaneously that I’m not accomplishing much of anything.

*Instantaneous Superstar*: My first book *must* be a discipline-shifting magnum opus! Unfortunately, I can’t actually get any words on paper because my initial attempts at a first draft feel feeble, small, and incompetent when compared to the brilliant, flawless, and award winning book I imagine producing.

*Super-Mom/Dad*: My standard of parenting is so high that I’m perpetually exhausted (particularly in the summer months). As a result of my perfect parenting standards, I have difficulty carving out time to write during the summer and experience debilitating guilt when taking time for my writing (or myself).

Maybe these sound familiar, and I’m sure you could come up with more examples of high expectations run amok. Let’s be clear, I’m not writing this column to judge anyone. Instead, I’m describing these examples because if you suffer from the kind of high expectations that induce writing paralysis, guilt, shame, or feeling not good enough, smart enough, or dedicated enough, then I want you to consider trying one of the strategies described below. At a minimum, they will provide you with ideas about how to *identify* immobilizing expectations, *release* the unhealthy components and *respond* in a way that gets you back to daily writing.

**Strategy 1: Rethink Your Career as a Book With Many Chapters**

Take 30 minutes of time to journal about your career from a long-term perspective. In other words, instead of feeling that you have to do everything all at once, imagine that your career is literally *a book with many chapters*. Each chapter represents a five-year span of time in which one type of activity is front and center. Imagine that there’s one big goal for each chapter (the title) that serves as the guiding force for your professional activities. If you’re on the tenure track, Chapter One is going to be entitled *Research and Writing*. But the later chapters can focus on becoming a master teacher, working as a public intellectual, engaging in activism for social change, creating organizational change at your particular institution, or whatever is important to you. This type of reflection about your career over the long run often frees early-career academics from a sense of having to do*everything* now, and instead allows you to imagine your goals as unfolding over the length of your career.

**Strategy 2: Develop a Metaphor to Understand Your Writing Process**

Unrealistic expectations for the production of writing often emerge from a lack of awareness of the length, depth, and oscillations of our own writing process. I used to be in a writing group with a political scientist named [Michelle Boyd](http://www.amazon.com/Jim-Crow-Nostalgia-Reconstructing-Bronzeville/dp/0816646783/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1278088781&sr=8-1" \t "_self)who described [writing as birthing](http://www.newfacultysuccess.com/ResourcesReferrals.en.html" \t "_self). She developed an elaborate metaphor in which each stage of pregnancy (from conception to birth) had a parallel to her writing process. Fully developing this metaphor required an awareness of her own process, the time frames in which her writing occurred, and the desire to understand how her writing unfolds over time. The benefit to developing your own metaphor is that it enables you to release yourself from the idea of producing a perfect first draft (because that’s just not how anyone’s process really works). Instead you learn to understand how you move from a new idea to a complete manuscript so that you can appreciate your ideas when they are in the fragile and unformed early stages, nurture them along through revision, share them regularly with others, and watch them grow into mature and polished manuscripts.

**Strategy #3: Create a 0 – 100 Percent Reviewer List**

One of the best ways to keep unrealistically high expectations from paralyzing your writing is to share your work throughout the writing process. At any given time, I understand my own manuscripts as somewhere between 0-25 percent, 25–50 percent, 50-75 percent, or 75-100 percent complete. I keep a corresponding list of reviewers for each stage. For example, when a manuscript is 0-25% complete, I ask a particular group of people (my husband, my writing group, and my long-standing graduate school friends) to read it and provide quick feedback about the central idea. If a manuscript is 75-100 percent complete, then I send it to a different group of readers (people who are experts in my subfield) for more comprehensive feedback. The key is to avoid holding onto manuscripts until they are almost complete before you request feedback. Waiting until something is “perfect” only heightens anxiety and encourages over-investment, over-attachment and holding onto manuscripts too long. Instead, you want to continually share your work with trusted readers and ask for feedback that is appropriate to the stage it is in. Get comfortable saying things like: "Can you read this in the next week? It's at 25 percent and I just want to know what you think about the idea." Doing so will help you to hold expectations that accurately correspond to your manuscript’s stage of development.

**Strategy #4: Experiment With Lowering Your Expectations**

One of the homework assignments I give my [Faculty Success Program](http://www.newfacultysuccess.com/2010FacultySuccessProgram.en.html" \t "_self) participants is to lower one of their standards every day for a week. The only rule is that they can’t lower their standards in the areas of research, writing, or personal care. But everything else is fair game: summer course preparation, household cleanliness, e-mail responsiveness, etc…, It’s amazing what happens when high achievers try lowering their standards each day. If you regularly operate with uniformly high standards across every area of your life, then lowering your standards and learning how to make conscious decisions about when and where to invest your best time and energy can feel positively liberating! Most of the time nobody even notices and you will increase the time you have available for the things that really matter.

**Weekly Challenge**

This week I challenge you to:

* Write every day for 30-60 minutes.
* If you find yourself procrastinating or avoiding your writing, patiently ask yourself: *What’s going on? What are my expectations? And what am I afraid of?*
* If your resistance to writing is driven by unrealistically high standards, try journaling about your career as a book with many chapters, or developing a metaphor for your writing.
* Expand your sense of the writing process to include ongoing feedback and conversation with others by creating a 0-100% reviewer list.
* Try adjusting how you approach your first drafts from perfectionist judgment to compassion by treating your initial writing with the same loving gentleness you would give to a baby, a puppy, a seedling, or whatever is small and fragile but will grow into something big and strong.
* Lower one standard each day this week (other than writing and self care) and see what happens.
* Try reading Peg Boyle’s excellent series on [Procrastination](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/dissertation/single12" \t "_self)and [Perfectionism](http://www.insidehighereducation.com/advice/dissertation/single10" \t "_self) in order to better understand these issues.
* If you’re completely lost and have no idea what you’re doing, read Wendy Belcher’s *[Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success](http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Your-Journal-Twelve-Weeks/dp/141295701X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1278087749&sr=8-1" \t "_self)* – it will provide you with a framework, process, and timeline for moving from idea to complete draft.

I hope this week brings you new insights on how your resistance works, the freedom that comes from lowering your standards to appropriate and achievable levels, and forward movement on your summer writing project.

Peace and Productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore